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## Back in Inverness

WINTER WAS A BIG DISAPPOINTMENT compared to last year in Canada. Last year, she remembered driving from Nova Scotia to Quebec and seeing massive snowdrifts along the side of the road. It took a while for her to realise that the drifts were piled up on top of ice: rivers and lochans frozen long enough and solid enough to hold the weight of all the snow. The cars had crawled along, hugging the motorway until they arrived in a frozen Quebec City. She parked next to a basketball court. The court was flooded with water and a group of boys were playing ice hockey, black-hooded tops hiding them as they raced around in the half-dark of the city in the evening. The next day, she walked around and admired the ice sculptures on display in the streets. They wouldn't melt for months.

It was so cold that the skin on the back of her hands became dry and cracked—there was no moisture left in the air at all, it seemed. The snow that lay on the ground stayed white and powdery, with slush only where the car tires rolled over the thin layer left on the roads by the army of snow-clearing machines.

In the evenings, they went round to each others' flats, and brought hot food to share: every second meal was a potluck, where everyone brought a different dish. They sat inside in the warm and people told stories about the ice storm two years before. The pictures they showed her of the ice on the frozen trees and power lines were beautiful. Frozen as the wind had whipped it out to the side, the ice stood out in twisted raindrop shapes.

One evening, they went sledging. They had bought flat pieces of plastic, with cut-out handles, and carried them rolled up under their arms to the secondary school on the hill. They sat in a line in the dark, each clutching the front of their piece of Crazy Carpet, and raced each other to the bottom of the slope. When she went back in spring, she noticed there was a flight of stone steps and two benches on the hill—they hadn't even noticed them; had sledged right over the top of them, the snow was so deep.

When they had fallen off their makeshift sledges, the snow had made a soft landing.

After two or three months, the snow still hadn't melted. Everything was grey and shades of grey. She longed to see green grass again. If you scraped away the snow, the grass underneath was patched and colourless. She bought a bright red jumper and wore it whenever she felt cold. The colour warmed her up more than the fleece lining.

All the houses and workplaces were super-heated. When she got inside, she had to take off several layers. If she was at home, her shoes came off first, and were placed on a special drying mat just inside the door. Then her hat, gloves and jacket, shaking off the snow. She didn't know if it was easier to undo the zips and buttons with her gloves still on, or whether to try with her frozen, clumsy bare hands. Every trip outside was an expedition, every return home a triumphant victory. She wore tights and leggings and long socks under her jeans and felt like she would never be thin again. She would always be a bulky mound of clothes.

The large buckets of coffee from Tim Hortons began to seem like a good idea, if only to keep her hands warm. She ate muffins and drank soup; vats and vats of hot, warming soup, trying new flavours all winter. The supermarkets were full of food you rarely saw in her home in Scotland, and she learned how to cook pumpkin and sweet potato and serve it with corn bread, fresh from the oven and dripping with melted butter.

Thinking of all of this only took her from the bus-stop to the narrow footbridge over the River Ness. As she stepped on to the bridge, she remembered her friend's dad, who had also been to Canada and come back. The first time he had visited, the merchant navy boat he had been on had frozen into the ice of the St. Lawrence River. That night, the Montreal ice hockey team had skated out towards the boat and practiced there on the ice in front of them. The boat became a mascot as the team won game after game. The crowd watching the hockey practice and cheering them on grew nightly, until the sailors began to worry about what would happen if the team started to lose. At the end of the six weeks, the ice melted and the boat slipped away, leaving the hockey team unbeaten.

She looked down at the river. It was a cold afternoon, and there were patches of steam rising up from the water. It was still and clear, and to her left there was a hoar of frost over the grass on the Ness Islands. The mountains in the north were covered in snow, firing up pink when the sun rose or set.

As she reached the middle of the bridge, a man going in the opposite direction waved to someone behind her, and started his conversation on the move.

“Hello there!” he shouted over her.

“Hello yourself!” another man’s voice answered from behind her.

“It’s cold today,” stated the first man.

His friend was walking fast and overtook them both. His reply floated back to her. “Yes, there’s a lot of weather around just now.”

She imagined being a Canadian and seeing all this for the first time. It would be as exotic as she had found Quebec in winter, a picture postcard Highland scene.

She turned left after crossing the bridge, heading along the narrow pavement then onto the dirt path beside the trees that led towards Bught Park. On the pitch in front of the ice rink there were two teams playing shinty. There were only a few spectators, but underneath the coating of mud the players seemed to be wearing proper strips, so it was probably a real game and not just a practice. She crossed the road and walked close enough to hear the crack of the sticks. One side cheered as she walked into the car park of the ice rink.

It was about half an hour since the rink had opened, so there was no queue at the door. She paid—“one please, no skate hire”—and pushed through the door that led into the rink. As she did so, someone slammed into the side, shaking the plastic see-through walls around the edge of the ice. It was much louder inside, with people shrieking over the noise of the music. She walked around the rink, past the café. It smelt of chips and cups of tea, mingled with damp wood and the stale smell of the ice itself.

She sat on one of the wooden benches, next to a father and child. The small girl was dressed all in pink, except for the clunky blue hire skates her dad was lacing up. The little girl looked up enviously at her as she took her own pristine white skates out of her bag. As she took the guards off the blades and started to lace the skates up, the man followed his daughter’s gaze and looked over.

“Nice skates,” he said, and smiled at his daughter. “Maybe we’ll have to get you a pair like that when you’re older. Where did you get them?” he added politely, seeing she’d overheard the conversation.

“In Canada,” she said.

“Are you Canadian?” he asked.

“No, I’m from here,” she said.

“Oh right.” He moved away, uninterested, his daughter pulling him towards the rink.

She slowly finished lacing up her skates, then stowed her bag away under the seat. There were a lot of families, little kids running around, and a few groups of teenagers. Not many people were on their own like her.

She walked over to the ice and stepped on, pushing gently away from the side where the beginners were holding on. They always chose the wrong music to play here: skating was a much slower action than it looked, and the beat of the music was always just too fast to stay in time. She made each step as long as possible, gliding, going slowly around the corners until she was used to the ice again. In Canada, she was used to being one of the worst skaters on the rink, but here she was one of the best. She would have remembered skating on frozen lakes and canals in Nova Scotia and Ottawa, but here she had to concentrate on what was happening now. Parents held onto the sides, unable to teach their children; the children fell; and the few teenagers who could skate a little got in everyone's way as they practised stopping in a way that made as much ice spray up as possible. It was an obstacle course that demanded her complete attention. Every time she swerved neatly out of the way and carried on her unhurried circuit, she felt more confident in her abilities.

After a few circuits, she rested near the edge. People were too intent on their own progress to notice she was alone. In the centre of the ice two schoolgirls in hooded tops with the name of their skating club on the back were half-heartedly practising turns. The jersey tops almost covered their very short skirts. The marshal who was supposed to check on everyone's safety ignored the ice-spraying teenagers and skated over to chat to the two girls. They stopped turning and tried flirting instead. One of them bent down and tried to pull up her flesh-coloured tights, which were bagging round her ankles.

The ice got very crowded—skating suited the weather today, and it was one of the few times when the rink wasn't reserved for curling. The top layer of ice became scored with skate trails, piles of 'snow' gathering in the corners. She paused and banged the ice off her skates, felt her cheeks pink with the cold and exercise.

She stopped when she felt tired, trying to make the last circuit a perfect one. There was a queue of people returning their hire skates, but she didn't need to join it; she just located her bag with her trainers in it from where she had tucked it under the wooden benches. She wiped the blades of her skates clear of ice, carefully putting the guards back on and placing them back in her bag. Her feet felt flat and light after the heeled skates as she walked out the door back into the fresh, late-afternoon air.

It was almost dark now, and the shinty players were gone. The feeling from the ice rink lasted until she reached the bridge, then she felt her grasp of the present slipping away again. The bag with the skates in banged against her elbow, and all the memories rushed back. She stood still on the bridge for a moment, looking downstream towards the town. She remembered

with shocking clarity, clearer than the scene around her, going skating for the first time in Canada: it had just snowed, and she had bought her white skates the week before. Her friend had come to call on her and had shown her how to tie the laces of her skates together and carry them safely over her shoulder. She lived so close to the ice rink they didn't bother putting the skates in a bag to walk there.

Then she remembered crossing the bridge earlier and seeing the steam rise up, and seeing the shinty players in the field opposite, and how she had tried to picture it as though she was a Canadian. Before she had left for Canada, and before all her friends had left for their university courses and their training and their jobs elsewhere, she used to walk this way all the time. She had learnt to skate at the ice rink in Inverness. She walked back slowly to the place where she stayed now, homesick.

